© Journal of Islamic Studies 3:1 (1992) pp. 1–14

ORAL TRANSMISSION AND THE BOOK IN ISLAMIC EDUCATION: THE SPOKEN AND THE WRITTEN WORD

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The revelation of the Qur'ān was auditory before becoming crystallized in a written text. The Prophet first heard the term *iqra'* and only later recited the first revealed verses on the basis of their audition. The whole experience of the Qur'ān for Muslims remains to this day first of all an auditory experience and is only later associated with reading in the ordinary sense of the word. There is an ever present, orally heard, and memorized Qur'ān in addition to the written version of the Sacred Text, an auditory reality which touches the deepest chords in the souls of the faithful, even if they are unable to read the Arabic text.

Since it is the 'Mother of Books' and also the prototype of the written word in Islam, the oral dimension of the Qur'ānic reality, combined with the traditional significance of memory in the transmission of knowledge, could not but affect the whole of the Islamic intellectual tradition and educational system. It could not but enliven both the poetic and the prose memory of the Islamic peoples, strengthen the significance of oral transmission, and leave something of its impact upon the very understanding of the book in the context of traditional Islamic culture. As a result of the influence of the Qur'ānic revelation and also other factors related to the rise of the whole Islamic educational system, the significance of the oral tradition and memory as a vehicle for the transmission of knowledge came to complement the written word contained in books, especially those books which became central texts for the teaching of various schools of thought and which figured prominently in the relationship between the traditional master (*al-ustādh*) and the students (*tullāb*).[1] Such books became more than simply

[1] Concerning the texts used in traditional curricula of the *madrasahs* and in private circles see, for example, S. H. Nasr, 'The Traditional Texts used in the Persian *Madrasahs*', in his *Islamic Life and Thought* (London, 1987), ch. 10; M. S. Khan, 'The Teaching of Mathematics and Astronomy in the Educational Institutions of Medieval

the written text. Rather, they came to accompany and in a sense became immersed in the spoken word, through an oral teaching transmitted from master to student and stored in the memory of those destined to be the recipients of the knowledge in question. Such books were not exclusively written texts whose reality was exhausted by the words inscribed in ink upon parchment.

The oral tradition also played a cultural role in determining which book or books of a particular master would become texts to be discussed in study circles and would act as a vehicle for the transmission of the teachings of the master in question. The oral transmission helped to establish the authority of teachers who were to follow and it served as the criterion with the aid of which one could distinguish one student from another as far as his closeness to the master and understanding of the latter's message were concerned, although naturally debates often ensued.

This paper seeks to pursue this theme in one field, namely Islamic philosophy (*al-falsafah*), and its close ally in later centuries, theoretical gnosis (*al-ma'rifah* or *al-'irfān*), with which it finally merged especially in Persia and the other eastern lands of the Islamic world. Our analysis is based not so much upon scholarly research, as upon over twenty years of continuous study with traditional masters in Persia in the field of Islamic philosophy and gnosis, masters who would mention at the beginning of their instruction that the good student must learn not only to read correctly the black lines of the text in Arabic or Persian but that he must also be able to read what they would call 'the white parts' of the page or what in English would be called reading between the lines.[2] But this reading of the 'unwritten' text had to be carried out not according to the student's individual whim and fancy, but in accordance with the oral transmission stored in the memory of the master and going back through generations of teachers to the original author of the text and ultimately to the founders and major figures of the school in question—figures who also possessed a 'vertical' and non-historical relation with the source of that traditional school.

As far as philosophy and gnosis are concerned, there is also a factor

India', *Muslim Educational Quarterly*, 6, no. 3 (1989), 7–15; and the major study of G. Makdisi, *The Rise of Colleges—Institutions of Learning in Islam and the West* (Edinburgh, 1981), which contains a wealth of information on the use of texts in Islamic *madrasahs* as well as an extensive bibliography on Islamic education including works on the use of texts in various schools.

[2] On the living tradition of Islamic philosophy in Persia see H. Corbin, 'The Force of Traditional Philosophy in Iran Today', *Studies in Comparative Religion* (Winter 1968), 12–16; S. H. Nasr, *Islamic Philosophy in Contemporary Persia* (Salt Lake City, 1972); and T. Izutsu's introduction to *The Metaphysics of Sabzavari*, trans. M. Mohaghegh and T. Izutsu (Delmar, N.Y., 1977).

of a more external order to consider. In order to avoid the criticism and condemnation of certain exoteric '*ulamā*' and also the uneducated who might misconstrue their teachings, most philosophers couched their ideas in deliberately difficult language whose meaning they then taught orally to their chosen students. Although there are exceptions in this matter, as one sees in the case of Mullā Ṣadrā, the majority of the masters of Islamic philosophy practised this art of dissimulation through a deliberately complicated language, the key to whose understanding remained in the hands of those well acquainted with the oral tradition which alone could elucidate the meaning or the levels of meaning of the technical vocabulary (*al-iṣṭilāḥāt*).[3] The significance of the oral transmission was by no means limited to this function, but this role is also of some importance in the total understanding of the oral tradition and the spoken word in Islamic intellectual history and education.

Before turning to an examination of the works of individual authors, we should note that, in the context of the traditional educational system, knowledge of a particular figure meant and still means a penetration in depth into the thought of the author in question rather than a study of his thought in breadth. Today, in the modern Western method of study, if a person wishes to master the thought of let us say a St Thomas or for that matter Kant, he goes back to their original writings in Latin or German and examines all their work. In fact one would not dream of writing a serious book on a particular philosopher before reading all his writing. In the traditional Islamic context, on the contrary, the greatest interpreters of Ibn Sīnā, whose knowledge of Avicennan metaphysics could not be matched by anyone in the West, would probably have cast no more than a cursory eye over his metaphysical works beyond the *Ilāhiyyāt* of the *Shifā'*, the *Najāt*, and the *Ishārāt*, not to speak of the *mashshā'ī* master's numerous other writings. We have seen traditional masters who have spent fifty years studying the *Shifā'* and the *Ishārāt*, often along with numerous commentaries, and who have

[3] Books dealing with these technical terms have therefore always been important and have served as a basis for the exposition of teachers or have complemented for the student the oral explanation of the master. That is why books such as the whole class of *al-Iṣṭilāḥāt al-ṣūfiyyah* by 'Abd al-Razzāq Kāshānī and others, *al-Ta'rīfāt* by Sayyid Sharīf al-Jurjānī, *Kashshāf iṣṭilāḥāt al-funūn* by al-Tuhāwī, and other works on terminology have been so important in the history of Sufism and Islamic philosophy. See the still valuable studies of L. Massignon, especially his *Essais sur les origines du lexique technique de la mystique musulmane* (Paris, 1954); J. L. Michon, *Le Soufi marocain Aḥmad ibn 'Ajība et son mi'raj-Glossaire de la mystique musulmane* (Paris, 1973); P. Nwyia, *Exégèse coranique et langage mystique* (Beirut, 1970); J. Nurbakhsh, *Sufi Symbolism* (London, 1986–); and M. Horten, 'Philologische Untersuchungen zur islamischen Mystik', *Zeitschrift für Semitistik und verwandte Gebiete*, 6 (1928), 57–70. Concerning Jurjānī's *Ta'rīfāt* see G. Flügel (ed.), *Definitiones Sejjid Scherif Ali...* (Leipzig, 1845).

had an incredible understanding of Ibn Sīnā's ontology without having delved into the many other works of the master dealing with the subject.

In this context it is important also to mention how in a manner that is often mysterious, if viewed from the outside, one or two works of a master survive and become a main text in the teaching of a particular school accompanied by the oral transmission of his teachings, while other works do not enjoy such a status. The reason in certain cases such as that of Ibn Sīnā is easy to understand while other instances are much more difficult to explain. What distinguished the *Tamhīd al-qawā'id* of Ibn Turkah or the *Kitāb al-hidāyah* of Athīr al-Dīn Abharī from other highly qualified available texts and made the former main items in the traditional curriculum?[4] Must not the answer be sought in the spoken word, the oral transmission which accompanied such texts, and the reception of these teachings by immediate students of the authors in question, students who then propagated these teachings and established the 'privileged position' of the works in question? Surely the oral tradition along with the special master-disciple relationship must be considered, not to speak of intellectual and spiritual links between scholars and philosophers of different generations and the existence of affinities among various figures in the non-historical and atemporal dimensions of reality which remain outside of the framework of intellectual history as understood in the West today.

With these brief comments in mind, let us turn to a few of the outstanding Islamic intellectual figures. The first major Islamic philosopher, al-Kindī, certainly left his mark upon later Peripatetics but left no work behind which came to be established as a text in the traditional curriculum of Islamic philosophy. The towering figure of Ibn Sīnā in a sense eclipsed such earlier figures as al-Kindī and Abū l-Ḥasan al-'Āmirī, although al-Kindī continued to be honoured in later centuries as a great philosopher. The type of studies devoted to his writings by both Western and modern Muslim scholars, especially since the discovery of the manuscripts of a large number of his works in Istanbul half a century ago,[5] did not exist among those who kept the torch of *mashshā'ī* philosophy alive in the Islamic world itself, and in fact his particular interpretation of *mashshā'ī* philosophy did not gain acceptance among later members of this school, namely al-Fārābī, Ibn Sīnā, and Ibn Rushd.

[4] On these little-known figures, as far as the West is concerned, see H. Corbin (with the collaboration of S. H. Nasr and O. Yahya), *Histoire de la philosophie islamique* (Paris, 1986), 365 ff.; Corbin, *En Islam iranien*, 3 (Paris, 1972), 233 ff.; and S. H. Nasr, 'Theology, Philosophy and Spirituality', in Nasr (ed.), *Islamic Spirituality—Manifestations* (New York, 1991), 431 ff.

[5] Discovered by Massignon and published later by M. Abū Rīdah as *Rasā'il al-Kindī al-falsafiyyah*, 2 vols. (Cairo, 1950–3).

Turning to the towering figure of al-Fārābī, again one notes that such major works of his as the *Kitāb al-ḥurūf* remained peripheral to the development of most of later Islamic philosophy and its significance has only recently been discovered as a result of the publication of its Arabic text by M. Mahdi.[6] Even al-Fārābī's greatest masterpiece of political philosophy, *Ārā' ahl al-madīnat al-fāḍilah*, although very influential in the genesis and growth of Islamic political thought, did not become a main text in the later phases of development of the Islamic philosophical tradition. It was only his somewhat enigmatic work, the *Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikmah*, considered by a number of modern scholars to be not by him but by Ibn Sīnā,[7] that has continued to be studied and taught over the centuries, accompanied by an oral as well as a written tradition of commentaries. It was enough to attend the teaching sessions of Mahdī Ilāhī Qumsha'ī, one of the outstanding traditional masters of *ḥikmah* in Persia in recent times who translated this work into Persian,[8] to realize the vast 'unwritten philosophy' and the spoken word which have accompanied the written text attributed to al-Fārābī.

With Ibn Sīnā the presence of the oral transmission, which has survived for a thousand years, becomes felt more than before for anyone who experiences the teachings of the traditional masters of *mashshā'ī* philosophy. It is in fact a profound lesson in comparative philosophy to juxtapose the understanding of Avicennan ontology by such traditional masters of the subject during this century as 'Allāmah Ḥā'irī Yazdī Mazandarānī, author of *Ḥikmat-i Bū 'Alī*, or Mahdi Hairi,[9] and such Western masters of medieval philosophy as E. Gilson and H. Wolfson.[10] The difference in their treatment of the subject emanates not only from different methodologies, but also from the existing oral transmission in the one case and the simply written text in the other. The oral transmission certainly did not prevent different interpretations from being made in the Islamic world itself as one sees in the case of Naṣīr al-Dīn Ṭūsī and Mīr Dāmād, or the Ṣadrian interpretation of Ibn Sīnā made by certain followers of the school of Mullā Ṣadrā in the

[6] See M. Mahdi, *Alfarabi's Book of Letters (Kitāb al-ḥurūf)* (Beirut, 1969).

[7] See, for example, S. Pines, 'Ibn Sīnā et l'auteur de la Risālat fuṣūṣ fī'l-ḥikma', *Revue des Études Islamiques* (1951), 122–4.

[8] See Ilāhī Qumsha'ī, *Ḥikmat-i ilāhī khāṣṣ wa 'āmm*, vol. 2 (Tehran, AH solar 1345).

[9] See, for example, his *Hıram-i hastī* ('The Pyramid of Existence') (Tehran, 1983).

[10] Both Gilson and Wolfson have dealt with Avicennan ontology as expounded by Ibn Sīnā himself or by later Peripatetics in several of their works, for example E. Gilson, *L'Etre et l'essence* (Paris, 1948); and his *Avicenne et le point de départ de Duns Scot* from *Extrait des Archives d'Histoire Doctrinale et Littéraire du Moyen Age*, 2 (1927). As for H. A. Wolfson, see his 'Avicenna, Algazali, and Averroes on Divine Attributes', *Homaje a Millás-Vallicrosa*, 2 (Barcelona, 1956), 545–71; and his 'Goichon's Three Books on Avicenna's Philosophy', *Muslim World*, 31 (1941), 11–39.

Qajar period as against the views of a Mirzā Abu'l-Ḥasan Jilwah.[11] But all of these differences remained within the matrix of the traditional world with the presence of the oral or spoken word as well as the written text and therefore differ from the understanding of Ibn Sīnā emanating from the study of only his written words.

There is no doubt that there have been scholars in the West such as Wolfson or Corbin who had read more of Ibn Sīnā than most of the traditional Persian masters whom we came to know personally. But the latter, who usually limited their study in depth to the *Shifā'* and *Ishārāt*, with an occasional interest in the *Najāt*, had an understanding of Ibn Sīnā of a different order resulting from being immersed in an Avicennan world in which the written and the spoken word were combined in a unity that transcended the simply literal, historical, and grammatical understanding of the written text. It is important to note in this context that even the brilliant reconstruction of Ibn Sīnā's 'Oriental Philosophy' by Corbin,[12] based so much on the understanding of the later Islamic philosophical tradition, must be seen as a part of the vaster world of Avicennan ontology and cosmology dominated during later centuries by the two basic texts of the *Shifā'* and the *Ishārāt* and not in isolation from them.

Nowhere in the history of Islamic philosophy is the significance of the oral transmission and the spoken word more evident than in the case of Suhrawardī, the Master of Illumination (Shaykh al-ishrāq), whose masterpiece *Ḥikmat al-ishrāq*[13] is itself the crystallization in written form of the spoken word received orally both 'horizontally' and 'vertically', that is both through unspecified historical sources and the angelic pleroma of which Suhrawardī wrote so vividly.[14] Later Islamic intellectual history knew him primarily through the *Ḥikmat al-ishrāq* and to some extent the *Hayākil al-nūr* while, in comparison, his other writings, especially the doctrinal works *al-Talwīḥāt*, *al-Muqāwamāt*, and *al-Mashāri' wa-l-muṭārahāt*,[15] remained more or less neglected by

[11] See S. H. Nasr, 'The Metaphysics of Sadr al-Dīn Shīrāzī and Islamic Philosophy in Qajar Iran', in C. E. Bosworth and C. Hillenbrand (eds.), *Qajar Iran—Political, Social and Cultural Change 1900–1925* (Edinburgh, 1983), 177–98; and S. J. Āshtiyānī's introduction to Mullâ Muḥammad Ja'far Lâhîjânî, *Sharḥ risâlat al-mashâ'ir of Mullâ Ṣadrâ* (Tehran, 1964).

[12] See Corbin, *Avicenna and the Visionary Recital*, trans. W. Trask (Irving, Texas, 1980).

[13] See Suhrawardī, *Oeuvres philosophiques et mystiques*, vol. 2, ed. H. Corbin (Tehran, 1977); and H. Corbin, *Sohravardi, Le Livre de la sagesse orientale* (Paris, 1986).

[14] See S. H. Nasr, *Three Muslim Sages* (Delmar, N.Y., 1975), ch. II.

[15] Even in contemporary scholarship these works have remained relatively neglected in comparison with the *Ḥikmat al-ishrāq*, edited in its entirety by Corbin, and his complete Persian works, edited by Nasr. Corbin edited the section of these works on metaphysics but not those on logic and natural philosophy. See Suhrawardī, *Oeuvres*

most later philosophers, Mullā Ṣadrā again being an important exception.

The whole nexus between the *Ḥikmat al-ishrāq*, written so rapidly towards the end of its author's tragic life, and the later tradition of *ishrāqī* philosophy relies upon oral transmission and the spoken word. The figure who revived Suhrawardī's thought a generation later through his masterly commentary on the *Ḥikmat al-ishrāq*, namely Muḥammad Shahrazūrī, had not known Suhrawardī personally.[16] Yet he was bound to the master not only by the written text of his works, but also by a spiritual and intellectual bond which definitely must have issued from a living oral tradition. In reading Shahrazūrī's commentary on the *Ḥikmat al-ishrāq* as well as his own masterpiece, the as yet unpublished *al-Shajarat al-ilāhiyyah*, one feels as if Shahrazūrī had sat at the feet of Suhrawardī for many years. What relates the two figures to each other is not only a written text, but also the spoken word or an 'unwritten book' which delineated the universe of *ishrāqī* wisdom shared by both figures. There must have been a special oral teaching which accompanied the *Ḥikmat al-ishrāq* surviving Suhrawardī and surfacing later in the works of Shahrazūrī and Quṭb al-Dīn Shīrāzī and even during later centuries in the writings of Jalāl al-Dīn Dawānī and Mullā Ṣadrā. How could Mullā Ṣadrā have written his glosses (*Ḥāshiyah*) on the *Ḥikmat al-ishrāq*[17] without an oral tradition which linked him beyond the written words of the text to the founder of the School of Illumination? This continuity is what in fact characterizes an intellectual tradition which unfolds over the centuries on the basis not only of what the founding figure has written but also of the oral tradition which he has left behind, a tradition which remains alive through both the 'vertical' renewal of the tradition and the ever present oral transmission, which in turn makes possible successive crystallizations of the doctrines and teachings in question in written form.

The crucial role of oral tradition is also evident in the case of Ibn 'Arabī whose influence swept over the Islamic world shortly after Suhrawardī. How different the intellectual history of at least the eastern lands of Islam would have been if the Ibn 'Arabī of the *Futūḥāt al-*

philosophiques et mystiques, vols. 1 and 2, ed. Corbin (Tehran, 1976–7); vol. 3, ed. Nasr (Tehran, 1977). Recently H. Ziai has turned to the study of the logic of *al-Talwīḥāt* and other neglected doctrinal works of Suhrawardī in his *Knowledge and Illumination* (Atlanta, Ga., 1990).

[16] See H. Ziai, 'The Manuscript of *al-Shajara al-Ilahiyya*, A Philosophical Encyclopedia by Shams al-Din Muhammad Shahrazuri' (in Persian), *Iranshenasi*, 2, no. 1 (1990), 89–108.

[17] See H. Corbin, 'Le Thème de la résurrection chez Mollâ Ṣadrâ Shîrâzî (1050/1640) commentateur de Sohrawardî (587/1191)', in *Studies in Mysticism and Religion Presented to G. Scholem* (Jerusalem, 1967), 71–115.

makkiyyah had become better known than the Ibn 'Arabī of the *Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam*, especially as interpreted by Ṣadr al-Dīn Qūnawī![18] Of course the *Futūḥāt* was known to many authors but not as a whole. Rather, to quote a leading authority on the *Futūḥāt*, M. Chodkiewicz, the work served 'as an overflowing cornucopia of symbols, technical terms and ideas from which everyone picked his choice'.[19] In any case it was providential that the *Fuṣūṣ* seen through Ṣadr al-Dīn's interpretation, itself based upon the closest intimacy with Ibn 'Arabī, became the central work associated with Ibn 'Arabī and seen primarily as a text of theoretical gnosis which had the profoundest influence upon not only Sufism but also later Islamic philosophy and even theology, as we see in the case of Shāh Walīallāh of Delhi. Outside the circle which became heir to the Akbarian current of Sufism, Ibn 'Arabī came to be viewed not so much as the master of practical Sufism and the *Sharī'ah* and *fiqh* interpreted esoterically in the *Futūḥāt*, but as the metaphysician of the *Fuṣūṣ* seen through the eyes of Qūnawī, Mu'ayyid al-Dīn Jandī, 'Abd al-Razzāq Kāshānī, and others.[20] Even the most characteristic doctrine associated with Ibn 'Arabī, namely *waḥdat al-wujūd*, derives from the teachings of his disciples and the oral teachings which must have accompanied the *Fuṣūṣ* rather than from Ibn 'Arabī's own written works. We do not know what Ibn 'Arabī taught Ṣadr al-Dīn and others orally, but we do know how Ṣadr al-Dīn interpreted the written text of the master in the light of those oral teachings and it is this which is of significance as far as the oral teachings of Ibn 'Arabī are concerned.

The Ibn 'Arabī seen by centuries of Islamic metaphysicians and philosophers is not the same as the Ibn 'Arabī who emerges from a scholarly study of all his works put alongside each other and without recourse to the oral teachings received from a living master. The whole difference between the Ibn 'Arabī seen by Kāshānī, Mullā Ṣadrā, al-Nābulusī, or Ismā'īl Ḥaqqī and the one seen by modern scholars, whether they be Westerners or Muslims, but basing themselves solely on the extant texts, is again the spoken word, the oral tradition as it has been transmitted over the centuries by generations of masters, some of whom have claimed direct contact with Ibn 'Arabī in the 'invisible

[18] See J. Morris, 'Ibn 'Arabī and His Interpretors', *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 106 (1986), 539–51, 733–56; 107 (1987), 101–19; M. Chodkewicz *et al.*, *Les Illuminations de La Mecque* (Paris, 1988); and the major new study of W. Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge* (Albany, N.Y., 1989).

[19] From a paper delivered at the conference on Medieval Persian Sufi Literature at the University of London in November 1990.

[20] See W. Chittick's several studies on Ṣadr al-Dīn al-Qūnawī and his students, e.g., 'The Last Will and Testament of Ibn 'Arabī's Foremost Disciple and Some Notes on its Author', *Sophia Perennis*, 4, no. 1 (1978), 43–58; and 'Ṣadr al-Dīn Qūnawī on the Oneness of Being', *International Philosophical Quarterly*, 21 (1981), 171–84.

world' (*'ālam al-ghayb*) besides being heirs to the historical oral tradition of his school.

Whether current Western scholarship accepts the authenticity of this oral tradition or not is of secondary significance. What is most important is that the Islamic intellectual tradition itself has functioned with the belief that the oral tradition is of central importance. In the case of Ibn 'Arabī, for example, such recent masters as 'Allāmah Ṭabāṭabā'ī or Sayyid Muḥammad Kāẓim 'Aṣṣār, with both of whom we studied gnosis and philosophy for some twenty years,[21] would insist that it was of little use simply to read the text of the *Fuṣūṣ* and understand the Arabic by oneself. Rather, it was necessary to study it with a real teacher who could also impart to the qualified student the oral tradition which alone can clarify the meaning of the written word. That is why in gnosis, as in philosophy, a person who is said to have really studied the subject is called *ustād dīdah*, literally one who has 'seen' a master, that is, one who has benefited from the oral teachings and also the presence (*ḥuḍūr*) of the master who embodies those teachings and who renews and revives them through the very act of living their truths.

Turning to later Islamic philosophy, we see the same principles at work as in earlier centuries. The *Sharḥ al-ishārāt* of Naṣīr al-Dīn Ṭūsī caused the revival of the school of Ibn Sīnā. But later traditional philosophers did not consider this work to be solely the product of the exceptional intellectual powers of Naṣīr al-Dīn but also the result of the oral transmission of teachings which Ṭūsī received through several generations of masters stretching from Ibn Sīnā to himself. As for the *Sharḥ al-ishārāt*,[22] it in turn became a main item of the later philosophical curriculum taught by genèrations of teachers going back to Ṭūsī and his circle in Maraghah where he imparted oral teachings to accompany this exact and exacting philosophical text.

After Ṭūsī, numerous works inspired by the Avicennan or *mashshā'ī* school appeared in both Arabic and Persian including the encyclopaedic work of Quṭb al-Dīn Shīrāzī, the *Durrat al-tāj*. But again it was one work, the *Kitāb al-hidāyah* of Athīr al-Dīn Abharī, which became a popular text in educational circles in Persia and was taught and com-

[21] On 'Allāmah Ṭabāṭabā'ī, whose writings are gradually becoming known in the West, see the introduction of S. H. Nasr to his *Shī'ite Islam*, trans. and ed. by S. H. Nasr (Albany, N.Y., 1975). As for 'Aṣṣār, unfortunately none of his works has as yet been translated, but some have been published in the original Persian and Arabic, for example, *Waḥdat-i wujūd wa badā'*, ed. with introduction on the author by S. J. Āshtiyānī (Tehran, AH solar 1350).

[22] Printed in both Tehran and Cairo (the Cairo edition edited by S. Dunyā, 1960; the Tehran edition without editor, 3 vols., AH 1378), this work has never been seriously studied by Western scholars of Islamic philosophy, although many have drawn attention to it.

mented upon by many teachers both orally and in writing. One needs only to recall the *Sharḥ al-hidāyah* of Mullā Ṣadrā which gained so much popularity in India that it became the main text for the teaching of *mashshā'ī* philosophy in the subcontinent and gradually came to be known as *Ṣadrā*. When students claimed to have studied *Ṣadrā*, they did not mean that they had studied the various works of Mullā Ṣadrā,[23] but the single text of the *Sharḥ al-hidāyah* which was again accompanied by an oral teaching. The selection of Abharī's original work in philosophical circles, as well as Mullā Ṣadrā's later commentary, was based not on the texts alone of these works, but on the accompanying oral teachings and the later masters who were well versed in those teachings and therefore chose to teach those texts rather than numerous other works which were also available.

The same truth holds for the writings of Mīr Dāmād, Mullā Ṣadrā, and later philosophers. Whether it was the *Qabasāt* of Mīr Dāmād or the *Asfār* of Mullā Ṣadrā, an oral teaching always accompanied the written text.[24] In the case of these later figures, the chain of transmission of the oral teachings is much better known. For example, such an undisputed master of the school of Mullā Ṣadrā as Sayyid Abu'l-Ḥasan Qazwīnī, with whom we again had the privilege of studying the *Asfār* for many years, could trace his teachers back through the Qajar masters of this school to Mullā Ṣadrā himself and displayed an almost 'personal' relation to him as if the two were not separated by four centuries of human history. In his presence one felt that his link with Mullā Ṣadrā was not only the lithographed edition of the *Asfār* which he would hold in his frail hands and read before expounding his commentary and explanation. It was also a common universe of discourse and a lived and experienced intellectual reality which he shared with the Safavid master through the unwritten yet very much alive word, through the spoken truth transmitted orally as well as the written text from which he read. That was why, when he held the book before his shining eyes and read it, the book revealed another dimension of its meaning, one which would remain hidden if one were to turn to the text oneself without the help of the oral teachings.[25]

The reality of the oral tradition constitutes the reason why the line of transmission of traditional Islamic philosophy is nearly as important as the *silsilahs* of the Sufis. In the latter case a *barakah* and initiatory

[23] See S. H. Nasr, *Ma'ārif-i islāmī dar jahān-i mu'āṣir* (Tehran, AH solar 1348), ch. 8.

[24] On the relation between Mullā Ṣadrā and Mīr Dāmād see S. H. Nasr, *The Transcendent Theosophy of Ṣadr al-Dīn Shīrāzī* (Tehran, 1977), 32–3, 40, 41, and 45–6.

[25] S. J. Āshtiyānī has traced the intellectual lineage of such figures and their link with the Safavid masters of the 'School of Isfahan' in his already cited introduction to Lāhījānī and also in his introduction to Mullā Sadrā, *al-Shawāhid al-rubūbiyyah* (Meshed, 1967).

power are transmitted which alone allow the soul to ascend to the higher levels of being, while in the former it is an oral teaching which is the necessary concomitant to the written text, a complement without which the text does not reveal all of its meaning save in exceptional cases. In both instances, there is a truth to be transmitted which is not simply discursive and which cannot be exhausted in letters and words written upon the page, a truth which must remain in part oral to be transmitted to those prepared to receive it.

Although the subject of this essay is limited to the field of Islamic philosophy, it is not possible to speak of the oral tradition and the spoken word without saying a few words about the distinctly Sufi view of the subject. This view was shared in part by many later Islamic philosophers (*falāsifah*) and by those whom we might call theosophers (*ḥukamāy-i ilāhī*) whose thought is to be distinguished from what philosophy has come to mean for the most part in the West today.

One cannot speak of the spoken word without mentioning that primordial 'book' which is inscribed in the very substance of our being and with which the Sufis have dealt more directly than the Islamic philosophers. Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī, whose *Mathnawī* alone consists of six long volumes of poetry, says:

> The book of the Sufi is not black lines and words,
> It is none other than the whitened heart which is like snow.[26]

In the Islamic tradition the heart is the seat of the intellect and the instrument *par excellence* of original knowledge of which mental activity is a relatively externalized reflection. True knowledge is the knowledge of the heart, and it is here that man carries within himself the real 'book' of knowledge. This 'book' is composed of unwritten words. It is the inner chamber wherein the spoken word in the highest sense of the term, which means none other than the Word of God, reverberates. This inner 'book' is not available for all to 'read', for not everyone is able to penetrate into the inner chamber of his or her being, which is the heart, nor possesses a purified heart as white as the snow which has not as yet become sullied by the darkness of man's passionate soul.

Yet this inner 'book' has resonated and still resonates within the being of certain men and women and through them has left its deepest effect upon the intellectual life of Islam, not only in the domain of theoretical Sufism but also in later Islamic philosophy. It manifests itself directly in many illuminative passages of a philosopher such as Mullā Ṣadrā who often refers to such crucial pages of his works as *taḥqīqun 'arshī*, that is, 'truth verified through the Throne', the Throne being

[26] *Mathnawī*, ed. R. A. Nicholson (London, 1925–40), ii. 59.

not only the Transcendental Throne of God but also the heart which is *'arsh al-raḥmān* or Throne of the Compassionate.[27]

The significance of the oral tradition, its continuation over the centuries, its 'vertical' renewal by certain masters of a particular school, and the emphasis upon the memory to preserve the oral tradition are all affected by the reality of that other inner 'book' to which Rūmī refers, a 'book' whose reality has always subsisted in the firmament of Islamic intellectual life at whose centre stands *the* Book, namely the Qur'ān which is at once an oral and a written reality. One must never forget that to know something really well and to commit the spoken word to memory in an abiding manner is to know it by heart. It is this knowledge by heart[28] which has made possible, not only in Sufism but also in Islamic philosophy, the continuation of an ever-renewed oral tradition which has played such an important role in the Islamic education system and the modality of the transmission of knowledge from teacher to disciple over the centuries.

The oral tradition has affected the manner of reading and interpreting the written text, its teaching and transmission, and the role of certain texts and commentaries in the educational circles of the Islamic world. It is even significant in the correct reading of a particular manuscript and in the selection of manuscripts for establishing the text of a particular work. The spoken word is the key to the solution of many enigmas concerning the continuity of certain teachings as in the already mentioned cases of the *ishrāqī* school and the predominance of a particular interpretation over others as in the case of Ṣadr al-Dīn Qūnawī's interpretation of Ibn 'Arabī. The oral tradition also provides a direct link between the student and a master who might have lived generations ago, enabling the student to study the teachings in question in depth and to concentrate on one or two works which are then penetrated inwardly over a whole lifetime rather than to study horizontally the text of many works written by the same master. There have been exceptions such as Mullā Ṣadrā, who had, in addition to oral instruction, an encyclopaedic knowledge of earlier philosophical, theological, and mystical works ranging from al-Fārābī, al-'Āmirī, and Ibn Sīnā to Shahrastānī, Fakhr al-Dīn Rāzī, Ghazzālī, and Ibn 'Arabī, a knowledge which he combined with the oral tradition.[29] But usually the oral

[27] See, for example, his *Wisdom of the Throne*, trans. J. Morris (Princeton, 1981), where he refers to such crucial sections as *baṣīrah kashfiyyah* (insight revealed to inner vision) or *qā'idah mashriqiyyah* (principle from the source of illumination).

[28] On the traditional significance of the heart as the seat of knowledge see F. Schuon, *L'Oeil du coeur* (Paris, 1974).

[29] See Nasr, *The Transcendent Theosophy...*, 69 ff.

tradition and the spoken word created a different type of intellectual ambience from the modern one, an ambience in which one or two works surrounded by a vast oral commentary came to constitute knowledge in depth of the teachings of the traditional authority.

The oral tradition transformed the written book from the definitive text which was the sole basis of the ideas to be understood to the gate to a whole living world for which the book became the point of departure. We recall once when studying *al-Insān al-kāmil* of 'Abd al-Karīm al-Jīlī with the late Mahdī Ilāhī Qumsha'ī, he read the Arabic text and then gave a long discourse on divine love and its manifestations which seemed to have little connection with the outward meaning of al-Jīlī's words. When asked how these words conveyed such meanings, he answered that one should look at these words as signs pointing to the spiritual world and not in their usual literal meaning and as concepts closed in upon themselves. He added that only by becoming familiar with these words through understanding the traditional oral commentary upon them would one be able to fly with their help from the earth of literalism to the heaven of symbolism. The nexus between oral tradition and esoteric interpretation of gnostic and philosophical texts must not, however, detract from the outward meaning and diminish the role of oral tradition in enabling the written text to be read correctly, albeit outwardly. The traditional masters insist that the major texts of Islamic thought such as the *Ishārāt* or *Asfār* cannot in fact be 'read' correctly without the help of oral tradition, hence the central importance of having studied with a master. In a sense the spoken word makes possible the full understanding and correct 'reading' of the written text.

Much of what has been said here is of course to be found *mutatis mutandis* in other traditions, such as the cabbala in Judaism, and is not exclusive to Islam. But in Islam the oral tradition and the spoken word have played and continue to play even to this day such a central role that their importance must be asserted in the face of all the historicism and positivism which have sought to reduce the reality of the Islamic intellectual tradition to written texts and historically established influences. Historical studies and careful attention paid to the written text do of course also possess their own validity and significance but they cannot become exclusive and totalitarian without destroying the integrity of the Islamic intellectual tradition.

Today not only are the physical remains of the Islamic book in the form of manuscripts being destroyed in many parts of the world, but also much of the oral tradition and the spoken word is being lost as a result of the destruction of the traditional methods of education and transmission. Paradoxically it is therefore necessary to put into writing for posterity and also for the present generation much that was transmit-

ted until now only 'from the breast' of one person to another. But in doing so, one should never lose sight of the great significance throughout Islamic history of oral transmission in education and of the spoken word as the complement of the written text. Even today, when due to exceptional historical conditions so much is being recorded and needs to be recorded and preserved in written form, the essence of the oral tradition continues to survive as oral tradition, especially that primordial Word which can only be heard and yet remains eternally inscribed upon the very substance of our souls as human beings.